

'Pay to publish' schemes rampant in science journals

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Credit: Charles Rondeau/public domain

Dozens of scientific journals appointed a fictive scholar to their editorial boards on the strength of a bogus resume, researchers determined to expose "pay to publish" schemes reported Wednesday.

One [journal](#) snared in the sting operation offered the imaginary applicant

a 60/40 split—60 percent for the journal—of fees collected from scientists seeking to publish their research.

Universities have famously become "publish or perish" ecosystems, making many academics desperate to get their work into print.

Several publications assigned the phantom editor to an unpaid, top-level position.

"It is our pleasure to add your name as our editor-in-chief for this journal, with no responsibilities," responded one within days.

"Many predatory journals hoping to cash in seem to aggressively and indiscriminately recruit academics to build legitimate-looking editorial boards," Katarzyna Pisanski, a social scientist at the University of Wroclaw, Poland, wrote in *Nature*.

In this case, the publishers padding their mastheads failed to notice that their new recruit's name—Anna O. Szust—translates as "Anna, a fraud" in Polish.

Despite this inside joke, the probe of academic integrity at hundreds of science journals—some reputed, others already on a blacklist—was dead serious.

"Although pranksters have successfully placed fictional characters on editorial boards, no one has examined the issue systematically," Pisanski noted.

"We did."

Pisanski and three colleagues concocted the fake application—supported by a cover letter, a CV boasting phony degrees, and a list of non-existent

book chapters—and sent it to 360 peer-reviewed social science publications.

In the peer-review process, journals ask outside experts to assess the methodology and importance of submissions before accepting them.

Predatory journals

The journals were drawn equally from three directories: one listing reputable titles available through subscriptions, with a second devoted to "open access" publications.

The third was a blacklist—compiled by University of Colorado librarian Jeffrey Beall—of known or suspected "predatory journals" that make money by extracting fees from authors.

The number of these highly dubious publications has exploded in recent years, number at least 10,000.

Indeed, 40 of the 48 journals that took the bait and offered a position to the fictitious Anna O. figured on Beall's list, which has since been taken offline.

The other eight were from the open-access registry.

No one made any attempt to contact the university listed on the fake CV, and few probed her obviously spotty experience.

One journal suggested "Ms. Fraud" organise a conference after which presenters would be charged for a special issue.

"Predatory publishing is becoming an organised industry," said Pisanski, who decided not to name-and-shame the journals caught out by the sting.

Their rise "threatens the quality of scholarship," she added.

Even after the researchers contacted all the journals to inform them that Anna O. Szust did not really exist, her name continued to appear on the editorial board of 11—including one to which she had not even applied.

None of the journals from the most select directory fell in the trap, and a few sent back tartly worded answers.

"One does not become an editor by sending in a CV," came one reply.

"These positions are filled because a person has a high research profile and a solid research record."

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